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## Doubly Monstrous?: Female and Disabled

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## *Doubly Monstrous?: Female and Disabled*

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*Abstract:* In this article I consider instances in visual culture in which artists and filmmakers aestheticize women with damaged, missing or anomalous limbs. I focus upon Joel Peter Witkin's photomontage *Las Meninas* (1987), Peter Greenaway's film "A Zed and Two Noughts" (1985), *Alison Lapper Pregnant* a statue by Marc Quinn, Mathew Barney's film "Cremaster" (2002), David Cronenberg's "Crash" (1996), Luis Buñuel's "Tristana" (1970) and David Lynch's short film "The Amputee" (1973). I argue that although the artists and filmmakers reveal, rather than disguise the damaged, anomalous or missing limb(s) of the women, thus valorising their particular embodiment, these women are paradoxically still portrayed as deviant and monstrous.

### Article:

Throughout human history bodies that deviated from the norm were considered monstrous. However, more so for the female, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains: 'Western thought has long conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Aristotle maintained that monstrosity was '... a graduated scale of imperfection falling away from...the intended perfect form: that of man'.<sup>2</sup> Considered in this light, women whose bodies are anomalous in some aspect have been posited as doubly monstrous, since they are both female and disabled.

Although Barbara Creed has done an extensive study of the 'female monster' in horror films and shown that 'the monstrous feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity,<sup>3</sup> in the examples that follow, I examine the way in which a number of contemporary artists and film-makers have constructed the female disabled body as monstrous, by conflating her disability with the not-human, animals and machines, or by drawing an association between her deviant body and deviant behaviour. I argue throughout that although the artists and filmmakers appear to valorise rather than eschew women with missing, damaged or mutated limbs by bringing them into public view, they continue to be read as the negative part of binary oppositions, such as, normal and pathological, able-bodied and disabled, human and not human. However, this in itself may be read as the artist's engagement with a Post-modern, anti-aesthetic, which critiques Western representation and master narratives and thinks in terms of difference.<sup>4</sup>

I begin by identifying connections between Joel Peter Witkin's (1987) photomontage *Las Meninas* and other art historical and screen cultural depictions of those considered not human, in particular Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas* (1656), Jonathan Frakes film "Star Trek: First Contact" (1996) and Tod Browning's film "Freaks" (1937). I follow with a discussion of Peter Greenaway's "A Zed and Two Noughts" (1985) and introduce various ways in which the classical Greek statue *Venus de Milo* is used as an allegory to suggest either beauty or female moral disintegration; however I point out that the *Venus de Milo* was used by artists such as René Magritte, Giorgio de Chirico and Joel Peter Witkin to suggest an

anti-aesthetic, one that works against canonical notions of beauty. A correlation between a lack of morality, disability and the monstrous in “A Zed and Two Noughts” is discussed in relation to Luis Buñuel’s film “Tristana” (1970). I focus upon the divergent and often contradictory images of vulnerability and strength evident in Aimee Mullins’ prosthetic body in Mathew Barney’s 2002 film “Cremaster” as well as photographs of her in *Dazed and Confused* magazine. A relationship between the anomalous female body and sexual perversion, an aspect addressed in “A Zed and Two Noughts” and “Cremaster” is taken up in my analysis of the ways in which David Cronenberg creates a connection between Gabrielle’s damaged prosthetic body and sexual deviance in his film “Crash” (1996). Finally the silence of a female double amputee in David Lynch’s short film “The Amputee” (1973) is considered alongside images of male amputees and women silenced by wearing the Burka in the Iranian film *Kandahar* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf (2001)).

## Joel Peter Witkins – *Las Meninas*

In 1656 Diego Velázquez painted *Las Meninas* (The Maids), which depicts Velázquez at his easel, a partial mirror reflection of the King and Queen of Spain—Philip IV and Mariana, the subjects of the artists’ painting, as well as their daughter Dona Margarita, surrounded by an entourage of maids, a midget (Nicolastio Pertuasto)—a dwarf ‘of formidable appearance’ (Mari Barbola) and a dog.<sup>5</sup> It was customary in seventeenth century European courts for monarchs to keep dwarfs and other *prodigia* (monsters) as a source of amusement. However, it is evident, given Velázquez made single portraits of many dwarfs; he was sympathetic to their plight and gave them a dignity not generally afforded. *Las Meninas* may be considered a humanist as well as anti-humanist painting, since it valorises the artist as hero thus upholding one of the tenets of humanism, but also acknowledges the right to equality of those considered different.

Joel Peter Witkin’s photomontage *Las Meninas*, New Mexico (1987) re-mediate the Velázquez painting by reconfiguring subjects that denote Spanish hierarchy into figures that represent contemporary marginalized individuals—all equal in terms of their desire to be recognized. A grotesque form, reminiscent of those painted by the contemporary Spanish artist Joan Miro stands in place of Margarita’s entourage, indeed, it is the largest figure in the painting and inscribes the scene with a sense of the monstrous. A man with scarred body and outstretched arms (perhaps to represent a homosexual, masochist or body builder) is cut at the waist by the framing and the infant Margarita in her hoop petticoat and crinoline skirt is replaced with a female double amputee whose leg stubs protrude as she sits on a cage like structure on wheels.<sup>6</sup>

Although the female amputee in Witkin’s photomontage is surrounded by other objects and things that point to the post-human (that is, body mutation and hybrid forms), she is not a cyborg in the way that it has been generally theorized or represented, however the prosthetic addition to her body, no matter how partial, invites this kind of reading.

As such, Witkin’s part human, part machine, double amputee, re-emerges in the image of the Borg Queen (Alice Krige) in “Star Trek: First Contact” (Jonathan Frakes, 1996). When we first see this aberrant and abject *Venus de Milo*, with technological spinal column and cranial implants, she is lowered into a prosthetic steel dress, which completes her body and enables her movement. Because the Borg assimilates human as well as other species by fusing them with technological prosthesis, they present partial, disabled bodies as a negative ontology. However, it is this very partiality and ability to connect with others in the Borg collective that is perceived by feminists and others as a positive aspect of cyborg identity (since a cybernetic identity is equated with use of the Internet); even though science fiction films persistently portray this state of being as monstrous and undesirable. The Borg Queen is not only

presented as monstrous by virtue of her machine body, but also because within the narrative she attempts to seduce Jean Luc Piccard (Patrick Stewart) and Data (Brent Spiner), two of the primary protagonists into a cyborgian existence.

Although the Borg Queen is obviously impaired we do not immediately notice the impairment of the amputee in Witkin's *Las Meninas*; we notice only that there is hollowness where her legs would usually be. This strange and unnerving void, which suggests absence and loss, is always associated with a prosthetic, however, with the wheels attached to follow the curve of its structure the limited function of the cage supports the amputee's verticality and enables her circular motion.

Since 'the cage' was the name given to the structure underneath a crinoline dress to support its dome-like shape, Witkin is obliquely referring to the seventeenth century technology that emphasized the female hips against a narrow waist, thus '...representing a domestic, sexualized ideal of femininity'.<sup>7</sup> However, although the cage could have been used as support for a crinoline skirt to disguise the woman's stubs, Witkin left both uncovered. Instead, the cage as simultaneously skirt and prosthesis is offered as a visible structure that invites speculation about the invisible that applauds disfigurement and difference. As German Celant has pointed out, Witkin '...sees freaks as the manifestation of something exceptional and extraordinary'.<sup>8</sup>

Since the female amputee is positioned higher in the space than Velázquez's Margarita and gazes through a transparent black veil, she is perceived as seductive young woman. Are we to read this double take - child/woman body as reflecting a deviant sexuality, one that is also read in the body of the male, who is equally dismembered? Or that the woman has an ability to seduce, which may or may not be attributed to her bodily form.

In the Velázquez painting a maid kneels as she touches Margarita's hand, establishing her subservience to this royal child. However, in Witkin's photomontage the amputee who replaces Margarita holds a rope attached to a sleeping dog, creating a connection between her body and that of the animal.

The dog in the original and Witkin's remediation represents '...conventional iconography in portraiture painting, in which the dog is an illusive symbol of a female subject's sexuality, domestication, morality...'.<sup>9</sup> However, in light of Witkin's focus on aberrant bodies in many of his other artworks and his statement 'I can work with people who are crippled, diseased, distorted or whatever, because I look at them with an idea of healing—not physically, but through aesthetic association'<sup>10</sup> he may have included the dog to depict the eugenic notion that women as well as those who were malformed were considered closer to animals and undesirable. Nina Lykke and Rosi Braidotti maintain that, 'Human' and 'Nature': ...are the two pillars on which Western Humanism has erected itself, bearing as its corollary historical instances of systematically sustained exclusion, domination and extermination'.<sup>11</sup> Those who were excluded and dominated were more often than not marginalised groups, that is, those who were deemed by humanist standards as not human. In this sense we could read 'human' as 'normal' and 'nature' as 'difference'.

Although there is obvious interaction between the figures in the Velázquez painting, quiescence pervades Witkin's photomontage in which each character appears not only different from but estranged from one another. Witkin takes individuals 'collectively imagined as defective'<sup>12</sup> and represents them as different by degrees, thus valorizing each of their particular subject positions.

The amputee's aberrant body, surrounded by equally deviant and not human bodies are evocative of the

real side show individuals depicted in “Freaks” (Tod Browning, 1937)—reminding us of the prejudice that was and still is directed towards those who are differently embodied.<sup>13</sup> A disclaimer (not made by Tod Browning) was provided as visual text at the beginning of the film and appears to set the film as a moral lesson for those who viewed it:

For the love of beauty is a deep seated urge which dates back to the beginning of civilization. The revulsion with which we view the abnormal, the malformed and the mutilated is the result of long conditioning by our forefathers. The majority of freaks, themselves, are endowed with normal thoughts and emotions. Their lot is truly a heart- breaking one.<sup>14</sup>

Issues of miscegenation and eugenics were addressed within the narrative, in which Hans (Harry Earles) the dwarf manager of the traveling carnival was referred to as a monkey. Relating his small body stature to that of an animal refers to ideas generated by evolutionary theories and social policy from the late nineteenth century, which held that people with abnormalities were considered to possess less than normal intelligence and so considered not human.<sup>15</sup> The final scene in “Freaks” resonates strongly with that of the Borg, for one of the ‘normal’ girls who mocked the carnival folk is made ‘one of them’—she is amputated from the waist down and displayed. The freaks, considered not-human, are paradoxically presented in the film as more ethical than those who consider themselves superior.

## **A Zed and Two Noughts**

Peter Greenaway’s “A Zed and Two Noughts” (1985), a contemporary take on “Freaks,” which resonates strongly with *Las Meninas*, includes a mélange of differently embodied individuals, linked in one way or another to caged animals in a zoo. Zoo animals, like individuals in traveling carnivals were considered exotic and different to ‘normal’ humans. The central female character is Alba Bewick (Andréa Férreol) whose right leg was amputated after it was damaged in a car accident with a swan. The wives of Oswald and Oliver Deuce (Brian and Eric Deacon), separated conjoined twins who work at the zoo, also died in the accident. Oswald and Oliver become Alba’s lovers not only because she shared their wives last moments but also because her amputated leg symbolizes their own surgical separation. Alba also becomes an object of desire for Van Meegeren (Gerard Thoolen), the surgeon who removed her leg, who has a penchant for paintings by Johannes Vermeer and is an amputee devotee.<sup>16</sup>

Amputee attraction has been noted since around 1933 and those who want to be amputees were labeled Apotemnophilia by John Money in his 1977 article of the same name. Since the rise of the Internet, hundreds of sites have been set up for those devoted to the concept of amputee attraction.<sup>17</sup> Like Fat Admirers, mostly men, who admire and sexualize grossly overweight women, there are negative and positive connotations associated with these aesthetic attractions.<sup>18</sup> However these radical positions do challenge existing notions of aesthetic beauty, in which ‘The female able body is identified as an object for desire and the disabled body is an object of disgust.’<sup>19</sup>

Paradoxically, although Van Meegeren is attracted by Alba’s amputated leg he arranges for her to wear an exact replica of a dress worn by the woman in Vermeer’s *The Music Lesson* (1662), which disguises Alba’s prosthetic leg under a floor length garment.<sup>20</sup>

Alba’s counterpart in the film, since her name recalls the famous statue without arms, is Venus de Milo (Frances Barber) a beautiful and sexually deviant prostitute who vies for, but fails to gain the twin’s attention. However, although she is not physically disabled an association is drawn between her unusual desires (she wants to have sex with a zebra) and the anomalous body of the *Venus de Milo*.



Although Greenaway correlates deviant behavior with deviant bodies, his attempt to disrupt the canonical association between the *Venus de Milo* and purity, was reflected earlier by the Belgian artist René Magritte whose plaster cast version of the *Venus de Milo* entitled *Les Menottes de cuivre* (1931) undermined the flawlessness of the original white marble statue. He painted the drapery of his Venus in regal blue, her body in flesh tones and the end of her arm stubs with blood-red pigment. The ‘... monumental, static, closed and sleek...’<sup>21</sup> classical body of the *Venus de Milo* becomes grotesque in Magritte’s copy because he portrays her body open and bleeding. As such, her body is linked to actual female embodiment, rather than to the sublime body of the *Venus de Milo*. Likewise, Giorgio de Chirico upset the balance, harmony and form of the *Venus de Milo* in *The Uncertainty of the Poet* (1913). In this painting he twisted the headless, armless and legless torso of Aphrodite to suggest fat deposits in the female body.<sup>22</sup> Joel Peter Witkin’s Venus, which he called *Madam X, San Francisco, 1981* is one that disrupts the usual distinctions between genders, for the naked model bereft of arms, has well developed female breasts as well as a penis, clearly seen above the drapery that covers the models legs. The image recalls hermaphrodites—inter-sex beings who were thought to lead to ‘...moral and social degradation.’<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault explains: ‘For a long time hermaphrodites were criminals, or crime’s offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being confounded the law that distinguished the sexes...’<sup>24</sup>

More recently, Bernardo Bertolucci correlates deviant bodies with deviant behavior in his film “The Dreamers” (2003). Matthew (Michael Pitt) is initiated as a ‘freak’ by his new French friends, Isabelle (Eva Green) and her twin brother Theo (Louis Garrel) after they have successfully run the length of the Musée du Louvre. ‘We accept him, one of us...we accept him one of us’ they chant. At that point Bertolucci cuts to a short sequence from Tod Browning’s film *Freaks* in which the members of the traveling show accept Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova), a full sized woman, after she has married the midget Hans (Harry Earles). ‘We accept her. One of us’, they chant. After calling them freaks and trying to poison her new husband, Cleopatra is literally made one of them by the circus freaks, who cut off her limbs and turn her into a chicken woman.

Later in “The Dreamers” Isabelle, stands in a darkened doorway, wearing only a long white robe from the hips down and long black gloves that make most of her arms disappear. Matthew correctly identifies her as the *Venus de Milo* and whilst he is caressing Isabelle she says ‘I can’t stop you I’ve got no arms’. Isabelle’s metaphorical amputation signals her initiation into a normative sexual relationship with Matthew, whilst simultaneously depicting her as vulnerable and temporarily disabled. Bertolucci focuses not so much on the beauty associated with the *Venus de Milo* figure, but the powerful associations that might be drawn between the vulnerable female body, disability and attraction.

These artworks critique Western representation by radically subverting one of its icons. In ‘The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture’, Hal Foster said: “Anti-aesthetic” is the sign not of a modern nihilism—which so often transgressed the law only to confirm it—but rather of a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them’, and further, the “Anti-aesthetic”... signals that the very notion of the aesthetic, its network of ideas, is in question...’<sup>25</sup> Given this, we might conclude that these artists are asking us to consider the politics of the lived body in contrast to the notion of a body that transcends ordinary experience.

Cindy LaCom notes in her study of female disability in the Nineteenth Century that: ‘as the female body came to function as a representation of feminine morality, the disabled body was increasingly read as a sign of either sexlessness or sexual deviance’<sup>26</sup>, since an association was made between their deformed

bodies and deformed principles.<sup>27</sup> Several ideas might have informed this view. In the Eighteenth Century the soul was deemed to be indivisible from the body, and woman was, according to John Millar, society's moral barometer, so there was a greater emphasis on her body to reflect virtue.<sup>28</sup> Even now, 'Stereotypes of disability often focus on asexuality, of lack of sexual potential or potency' and 'Where disabled people are seen as sexual, this is in terms of deviant sexuality...'<sup>29</sup>

A correlation between the deviant female body and perversion is signaled in "A Zed and Two Noughts" when Alba tells the twins a story about a whore who had both legs amputated, so that her limbs would no longer inhibit sexual penetration. When Alba falls pregnant the twins ask her how this was possible. Alluding to the fact that her anomalous form would abhor most people, she replies, 'is having one leg a form of contraception? Rosemarie Garland-Thomson underscores the correlation between female body variation and undesirability:

Women with disabilities, even more intensely than women in general, have been cast in the collective cultural imagination as inferior, lacking, excessive, incapable, unfit, and useless. In contrast to normatively feminine women, women with disabilities are often stereotypically considered undesirable, asexual, and unsuitable as parents.<sup>30</sup>

Greenaway eroticizes Alba's body, rendered less sexually alluring by the normative standards described by Garland-Thomson, by highlighting her promiscuity, reproductive ability and excess. She gives birth to twins. This film, which exhibits a plethora of incomplete human and animal amputees, also paradoxically appears concerned with making them complete or symmetrical. Alba decides to have her remaining leg amputated, Oswald and Oliver have a suit made that symbolically rejoins them and Alba decides that the twins should be placed, after her death in the care of a male double amputee, since it would provide them with a sense of symmetry.

An association between deformity and lack of female morality, a feature of "A Zed and Two Noughts" was noticeable in Luis Buñuel's film "Tristana" (1970). Tristana (Catherine Deneuve) becomes a ward of the elderly Don Lope (Fernando Rey), but leaves him and falls in love with an artist. However, after having her leg amputated due to disease she engages in a passionless marriage to Don Lope, whilst remaining in love with the artist. We should note that engaging in a passionless marriage is not uncommon in marriages in which both parties are able-bodied. At the end of the film Tristana is shown exposing her body in ways considered unacceptable at that time and refuses to help her husband when he is having a heart attack. As with the artists previously mentioned in this article, Bunuel contrasts the female amputee with the body of a male. In a dream sequence Don Lope's amputated head perches on a church bell. It is an allegory not only of Tristana's distorted body but also her corrupt morality.

### **Alison Lapper Pregnant**

Greenaway's emphasis on sexuality and maternity, and the eroticisation of an otherwise physically incomplete woman is echoed in Marc Quinn's statue *Alison Lapper Pregnant* (2005), a depiction of the British artist born with Phocomelia, a congenital malformation in which her hands and feet are attached to abbreviated arms and legs.<sup>31</sup> Whilst this sculpture appears to transgress normative standards attributed to the female nude, because it dares to show a disabled naked woman, it nevertheless conforms to the shape of many sculptures from antiquity that through time or accidental damage are rendered partial. According to Marquard Smith there were a number of reasons why Quinn's sculptures were exhibited:

Firstly, they are meant to come into dialogue with the earlier neo-classical sculpture already

there, thereby working towards modifying traditional models of aesthetic beauty that are premised on conceptions of the intact body. Secondly, in order to do this they draw attention to the fragmented properties of these earlier sculptures that, through either the ravages of time, iconoclasm, or by design have become or were always already fragmentary.<sup>32</sup>

We can't help but read a visual resemblance between Lapper's upper body and that of the *Venus de Milo* (130-90BCE), and since the sculpture represented the ideal of feminine beauty at that time, we may assume that Quinn intended us to read Lapper's feminine (pregnant) body as also beautiful. However, if it was just feminine beauty that Quinn was emphasizing then he could have covered her shortened legs with drapery. Instead he represents her abnormal body in antithesis to hegemonic notions of beauty, defined by Aristotle as that which has '...order...symmetry and definiteness...'<sup>33</sup> Obviously Lapper's limbs do not conform to the usual scale and shape of the classical body, and since we are aware of her bodily differences we cannot, nor should we imagine her with normative limbs. We may consider Lapper's body perfectly imperfect in its uniqueness, or we may be drawn instead to the aesthetic of Lapper's calm gaze and position of her head, which resonate with Arnold Breker's heroic statues and enable us to project our own idea of heroism onto Lapper's visage. Indeed Marc Quinn said of his sculpture, which was commissioned for and installed in Trafalgar Square, London in 2005, a place that houses the statue of Lord Nelson: 'In the past, heroes such as Nelson conquered the outside world. Now it seems to me they conquer their own circumstances and the prejudices of others, and I believe that Alison's portrait will symbolize this'.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Witkins' Margarita, whose eyes engage the viewer, Lapper averts our gaze. Her cool, controlled look exhibits a steely power borne out of life struggles. She refused to wear prosthetic arms and decided to operate in the world without them. According to Quinn people with disabilities '...have stopped using their prostheses because they feel they are more about conforming with the normal body image society gives them than with making their lives better'.<sup>35</sup>

What is interesting for me is that the female body (albeit for a short while) becomes aberrant in the state of pregnancy and depicting Lapper in this condition Quinn is able to draw our attention to minute differences between what we consider normal female bodily changes, alongside bodily shapes considered abnormal. However, since these 'abnormalities' are juxtaposed, Lapper's otherness evokes age-old fears about the woman's body as site of monstrous births; '...the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end'<sup>36</sup>, thus relegating her body to that of nature, rather than order or culture.

We do not have this reaction to Ron Mueck's flesh-toned sculpture of a *Pregnant Woman* (2002)<sup>37</sup>, which has a realistic countenance. In fact, compared to Mueck's sculpture *Alison Lapper Pregnant* looks unreal and otherworldly. Quinn has literally constructed Lapper as monstrous—gigantic. Standing at 3.55 meters high, the statue is still smaller than the 5 meter high statue of Nelson. However, because it is closer to the ground her body evokes mythological creatures endowed with physical strength and appetite. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the grotesque corporality of giants '... manifests metamorphosis, an ambiguous state of becoming'.<sup>38</sup> In this sense then Lapper's body, which transformed during pregnancy is in antithesis to the obvious lack of development in her limbs. However, rather than being ambiguous, Lapper's pregnant body is imbued with the anxieties, for many, that surround reproduction, pharmaceuticals and the possibility of producing a child with birth defects.<sup>39</sup>

## Aimee Mullins

The real life amputee model, athlete and actress Aimee Mullins, presents a different case. Her prosthetic



legs are an object of fantasy linked with her athletic achievements, as well as marking her as exotic other in fashion magazines and films. Her artificial legs signify her as being differently embodied, however both her prosthesis and her leg stubs become the focus of her difference.<sup>40</sup> As a successful paralympian, Mullins is a paradox in that although by normative standards she is disabled, she is enabled by her ability to incorporate the artificial so effectively into everyday life. Although academically and athletically competent,<sup>41</sup> I wonder whether Mullins has been accepted with her disability because she was considered by *People Magazine* in 1999 as one of the fifty most beautiful people in the world in 1999,<sup>42</sup> an attribute promoted by eugenicists who saw an attractive appearance as the *best* external indicator of overall hereditary fitness.<sup>43</sup> I say this because Mullins first made headlines when she was used as a model and proudly walked along the catwalk with her prosthetic legs fully exposed.

In the following I will consider three different images of Aimee Mullins, the first in her role of the Entered Noviate in Mathew Barney's film "Cremaster" (2000), the second, a photograph of her in a track and field event and finally photographs of her taken by Nick Night for *Dazed and Confused* magazine in 1998.

### The Order/Cremaster

In *The Order*, one part of Matthew Barney's experimental film *Cremaster 3*, 2000, Aimee Mullins plays the role of the Entered Novitiate.<sup>44</sup> Partially naked she wears a nurse's hat, surgical gown and long white opera gloves as well as transparent glass prosthetic legs with high heel shoe extensions. Mullins's prosthetic legs, like her clothing is an aesthetic fashion item—an object that can be cast off at will, provoking ideas about the redesign of the human body through surgical intervention as well as the imagination. Barney (the Entered Apprentice)<sup>45</sup>, as Aimee's metaphorical double is similarly dressed. However his wound, expressed by the wet, blood-filled rag that hangs from his mouth (his teeth have been brutally broken) stands in contrast to her previously wounded amputated legs. As an example of the *new flesh* announced by Max Renn at the end of the film, "Videodrome" (David Cronenberg, 1983), a world in which human flesh and metal machines converge, Aimee's body represents a hybrid state in which the sensorial body is forced through biological mutation, disease or injury to form an alliance with the prosthetic (non-human or technological). This strange play of visual elements that point to the abject body, hybrids and sexual perversion might appear unusual, even bizarre. However, each of the films in Barney's "Cremaster" Cycle contains various aspects of Hollywood genre filmmaking in which women have been depicted as powerful and dangerous.

Mullins' partially naked sexualized body is intended to suggest the femme fatale of Hollywood film noir. The gloves that she wears evoke traditional striptease, burlesque, exotic dancing, as well as cross-dressing; this is also suggested by the dainty sandals worn by Barney. Amidst all this artifice are the transparent, glass prosthetic legs worn by Mullins, which reveal, rather than disguise her pink and exposed bilateral stubs. When she meets the Entered Apprentice they caress and she bites his shoulder. Large bloody scratches appear on his back and she transforms into half woman, half cheetah. The following scene shows her licking blood off her claws. She continues throughout the narrative transforming from Entered Noviate to Cheetah as she watches the Entered Apprentice scale various levels of the Guggenheim building. His extremely active, as opposed to her limited and awkward movements are contrasted.

Although women other than Mullins are represented in the film as having non-human attributes—one claws her way out of the soil beneath the building and chorus girls move like machines in unison with each other; it is Mullins obviously impaired body that is linked with blood sports and animalistic

pleasures—an association made in Greenaway's *A Zed and Two Noughts* by the *Venus de Milo*'s desire to couple with an exotic animal. Eventually the Entered Apprentice kills the Cheetah and the Entered Noviate, depicted as blindfolded and disheveled with her glass legs shattered is deprived of any power she had within the narrative.

Images of Mullins in *Crewmaster* tend to feminize her in extremely stereotypical ways—woman as monstrous cyborg, woman as *femme fatale*, woman as cat-like creature. Her deviant body appears to reflect her polymorphous sexuality. The glass prosthetic legs slow down her movement to a stilted gait and our gaze is drawn away from her obvious impairment to her obvious nakedness. These images of her provide a marked contrast with those taken of her as an athlete.

The *Cheetah* prosthetic leg that Mullins wears for athletics is one that reduces the lower leg to its most simple form, that of the tibia. It does not, and cannot replace the complex interplay between the nerves, muscles and bone of the organic leg and as such it represents loss of part of the human body as well as its augmentation. Her well-developed buttocks and upper body combined with the lean prosthetic legs make her look powerful, strong and confident. In the arena of paralympics disability, prosthetic devices that augment an individual are the norm; and the strangely distorted transtibial sprint foot that Aimee wears is an example of how the incorporation of the artificial is essential for the athlete's performance. These prosthetic legs do not mirror the human legs; instead, they draw our attention to technology as difference, making a very clear distinction between the human and the not-so human prosthetic attachment. In *Crewmaster* Mullins is ambiguously beautiful, but fragile; and like Gabrielle in the film, "Crash" (David Cronenberg, 1996), who must wear calipers on her damaged legs, she is a dangerous cyborg, both sexual and vulnerable.

## Dazed and Confused

The September 1998 issue of *Dazed and Confused* magazine was guest edited by Andrew McQueen who was influenced by Joel Peter Witkins' *Las Meninas* and its celebration of difference. The cover, which applauds Aimee Mullins athletic ability as well as her disability, shows her partially naked except for calf length tracksuit pants and her *Cheetah* foot sprints. Presenting Mullins in this way sexualises her and humanises her human/not human body.

The word, FASHIONABLE intersects at the very point on the image where her lower legs were amputated and asks us to question whether disability itself has become chic. The word 'ABLE' severed from 'FASHION' asks us to consider whether the industry may accommodate bodily images traditionally ignored. However, since the fashion industry has only ever been interested in deviant bodies, especially extremely thin female bodies then, it follows that it should be able to accommodate images that display the bodily difference of the amputee. However, contra other aberrant bodies, the thin body is aesthetically desirable. The break that occurs between FASHION and ABLE appears to suggest that the designer of the magazine was torn between fashion which belongs to able-bodied individuals and the fashionable-ness of disability.

Perhaps in contrast to the strong image of Mullins on the cover a more traditional and feminized image of disability was included of her inside the magazine. It revealed the transition between the previous notions of the monstrous feminine against the newer monstrous image of the cyborg. A photograph of Mullins wearing hoop skirt, evoked both the crinoline dress worn by Margarita in the Velasquez's *Las Meninas* as well as the cage underneath Witkins' Margarita, and accentuated the stiffness of her wooden prosthetic legs. Hinged at the knee joints, the legs lie like dead weights unnaturally in front of her body, and render her partial, distorted and damaged. Petra Kuppers observes that, '...the wooden fans and

crinoline do not only reference the literary and art historical canon, but also the phenomenology of body discipline, of docile bodies'. However further on she states that, 'We could easily close this discussion by delegating the image into the canon of disabling and misogynistic imagery where the disabled person is the exotic freak and the woman is the less-than-human thing'. She ends her discussion by stressing Mullins' agency in that she has chosen to be a model in order to change the way that people with disabilities are perceived.<sup>46</sup> As an athlete in a traditional male domain, Mullins has already transgressed the gender divide.

Amanda Fernbach argues: 'Rather than repeat dominant cultural associations that depict prosthetics as ugly and equate amputees with helplessness and disfigurement...' using amputees as fashion models '... celebrates the new technoflesh as chic, beautiful and powerful'.<sup>47</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson maintains that 'Mullins uses her conformity with beauty standards to assert her disability's violation of those very standards. As legless and beautiful, she is an embodied paradox, invoking an inherently disruptive potential'.<sup>48</sup>

Dressed as she is as homage to Witkin's *Las Minimas*, Nick Night, has cropped the image (in a similar way in which Wilkin cuts the body of the male in order to frame and emphasize the upper torso) so that Aimee Mullin's right foot appears amputated by the framing. But it is Mullins' 'dazed and confused' look that seems to make a commentary on her being depicted in this manner.

Marquard Smith, described Aimee Mullins as '...the figure of the quintessential prosthetic body, characterized perfectly in a more academic setting as a Cyborgian sex kitten'.<sup>49</sup> The figure of the cyborg popularized by Donna Haraway is a permanently partial identity, a hybrid of flesh and machine.<sup>50</sup> In Western culture the cyborg has become a potent metaphor of the fusion of human and machine, straight and gay, male and female, able-bodied and disabled, nature and culture; however because of its liminal nature it also represents the monstrous other. Braidotti explains the paradox well:

the monstrous other is both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity. The monster helps us understand the paradox of 'difference' as a ubiquitous but perennially negative preoccupation.<sup>51</sup>

Garland-Thomson argues instead that the disabled body, replete with prosthetics can be freed from its negative connotations in the post-humanist concept of the cyborg.<sup>52</sup> However, film theorist Vivian Sobchack, whose left leg was amputated just above the knee in 1993<sup>53</sup> and is dependent on a prosthetic leg for her own mobility warns of the sexiness of the cyborg identity and stresses instead the fragility of her flesh: 'Living—rather than writing or thinking—my 'newly extended body of technological engagement', I find the fragility of my flesh significantly precious'.<sup>54</sup> Sobchack reminds us that although the cyborg aesthetic has been wrapped up in fantasies that surround bodies modified by technology (body-building, cosmetic surgery, liposuction, breast augmentation) in an attempt to create the perfect female body, individuals who are dependant upon medical prosthetics are damaged, often vulnerable human beings who have had to learn to incorporate and assimilate the artificial into or onto their body.

## **Gabrielle in "Crash"**

David Cronenberg's controversial film "Crash" (1996) addressed the physical and psychological affects endured by a small group of people who share the common experience of each having survived a car crash. They are co-opted into a sexual fantasy that surrounds new relationships between flesh and metal by Vaughan (Elias Koteas) an ex medical photographer who photographs crash-site victims. Vaughan's

desire to merge with metal in order to become one with his 1963 Lincoln appears exemplified by Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette) a social worker and car accident victim who must wear leather and steel calipers so that she can walk with her grossly damaged legs. She has by necessity accommodated medical prosthetics but discovers that her prosthetic body becomes a fetish because it literally exemplifies a fusion between the body and technology. In fact her sexuality is played out in the space of the flesh between leather and steel. So when James (James Spader) (who wore steel pins on his damaged legs after his car accident), fucks her rough, corrugated and scarred legs through an opening in the caliper, he draws their crash experiences together in the act of sex and pain. In the 1975 novel *Crash*, J. G. Ballard describes Gabrielle as ‘...a creature of free and perverse sexuality’ and she is shown in the film being masturbated by Helen (Holly Hunter) whilst Vaughan and other friends are watching a film about crash-test dummies.<sup>55</sup> At the end of the film after Vaughan dies in a car crash, Helen and Gabrielle have sex in the back seat of his damaged car. Their bodies twist and contort as injured bodies would during a crash.

“Crash” not so much valorizes disability, but reveals that those who are disabled are sexual beings, with usual desires and needs who exist ‘...and function in a series of complex relations with’ their ‘inanimate others’<sup>56</sup> Paradoxically Gabrielle’s body is still linked to the monstrous because we are horrified by her injuries and the way in which Ballard uses these (albeit healed) injuries for his perverse pleasure.

Gabrielle’s rigid leather and chromic cyborg body, equipped with prosthetic clamps and back-brace excites Ballard into fantasizing about her as *new flesh* changed by technology. ‘Without thinking, I visualized a series of imaginary pictures I might take of her in various sexual acts, her legs supported by sections of complex machine tools, pulleys and trestles...’<sup>57</sup> Imagining Gabrielle in this way, makes of her just one more element in Ballard’s fantasy in which woman is a compliant machine.

The association between Gabrielle’s body and a machine is made more obvious when she attempts to fit into a car made for ‘normal’ people in the Mercedes Benz showroom. When she twists and turns in order to get through the door, part of her caliper rips the leather seat in a kind of obverse way in which a car had previously torn and wounded her precious skin. Although her calipers and fishnet stockings partially conceal the healed lacerations that extend lengthwise down her legs, they add to the strange allure of her attire, her robotic and stilted gait. When they have sex James unbuckles Gabrielle’s left leg and runs his ‘...fingers along the deep buckle groove’.<sup>58</sup> He twists Gabrielle’s body, already modified and restrained by technology in an attempt to investigate her new flesh.

Investigating the new flesh of a woman with recent lower leg amputations is the content of David Lynch’s short film “The Amputee” (1973) in which a double amputee (played by Catherine Coulson), sits in a chair writing a letter, unaware of the male doctor (David Lynch) who dresses her wounds. Although the doctor tries desperately to stop the flow of blood, the amputee continues writing her letter about failed relationships (of herself and others). By exposing the leg stub of the double amputee Lynch exposes the wound and female disability as abject. Are we to read this distancing (also noted in Alison Lapper’s detached expression) exhibited by the female amputee from the able-bodied male, as well as from her own abnormal body as reflecting the distancing that able-bodied individuals engage in with those who are disabled? Lynch, whose major themes have been body modification, mutation and horror, asks that we do not look away, but instead engage with images that cause unease.

## Kandahar

It is grounding to remember that in the lives of many amputees, particularly those with limited resources



in war-torn countries, a prosthetic limb is not associated with aesthetics, sexual fantasies or the desire to conform to the holistic body, a luxury of individuals in the West, but one in which the individual only desires mobility and work—enabled by a prosthesis. “Kandahar” (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Iran, 2001), is an example of a different perspective; the monstrous is simultaneously present and absent.

The narrative revolves around Nafas (Niloufar Pazira), a young journalist who is travelling back to her birthplace, Kandahar (Afghanistan), to save her sister who has threatened to kill herself after losing her legs in a land-mine accident. In order to get to Kandahar safely Nafas must disguise herself in a Burkha and travel over a land mine infested desert. The film not only exposes the Taliban’s oppression of women, through the enforced wearing of the Burkha, the taboo on women working away from home or from listening to music, but the plight of many amputees who need prosthetic legs. Afghanistan is one of the three worst land-mined countries in the world and has about 10 million active mines.<sup>59</sup> The film highlights the difference ascribed to women’s bodies, which are silenced and homogenised under the Burkha, alongside the bodily difference of the male amputees. Both are disfigured by the oppressive reign of the Taliban and the technologies of war.<sup>60</sup> Although men are shown at the Red Cross Station, haggling and bartering for prosthetic limbs made from crude steel rods covered with plastic or outmoded prosthesis unwanted by those in the West, to secure prosthetic legs for their wives or mothers, no female amputee is shown.<sup>61</sup> A significant scene in terms of my argument is one in which Hayat (Hoyatala Hakimi), who has scammed a pair of prosthetic legs from Red Cross and tries to sell them to Nafas, decides to keep them to remind him of his now dead mother whose legs were amputated after stepping on a landmine. The female body here is conflated not only with absence and death, but with a technology that signifies lack in a living body.

Invisibility traditionally associated with disability is highlighted in the film not only by the depiction of individuals who need prosthetic legs, but in the invisibility of women who must forego their individualism and freedom under the rule of the Taliban by wearing the Burkha in which all differences including gender are erased. In one scene Hayat disguises himself under a Bukha.

In sum, contemporary artists and filmmakers, concerned with difference as a product of post-modern (feminist) and post-human discourses have chosen to focus upon and valorise the alterity ascribed to the female amputee and to draw attention to bodies differently lived. They do this by presenting us with sometimes confronting images of actual individuals with amputated or malformed limbs or by alluding to absent limbs. However, by using the body of the female amputee as anti-aesthetic or antithesis to the perfect, beautiful or healthy body posited by humanists as the ideal, they also unwittingly position the female disabled body as monstrous other.

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## Notes

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41. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1998 with a dual degree in history and diplomacy. Copyright © 2007 Time Inc. A Time Warner Company. All Rights Reserved.

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61. In reality 'Land mines and unexploded ordnance have killed or maimed at least 200,000 Afghans since 1979', and 'Red Cross orthopaedic workshops in Afghanistan, staffed mostly by disabled Afghans, have produced over 43,000 artificial arms, legs, hands and feet since 1988' (Associated Press, 2003).